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Before you rush out to find that perfect job or internship, you'll need to write your resume. And not just any resume, but the kind that'll separate you from all the people applying to your college of choice or eager to land that dream job. Here are some ways to avoid the pitfalls of resume writing and land yourself in the spotlight.

First Things First: Getting Started

Samantha was just weeks away from finishing her junior year in high school and still looking for a summer internship. She always wanted to be a nurse, so she sent her resume to several local hospital recruiters, but was just not getting any responses.

Panicked and sure she'd be jobless for the summer, Samantha passed her resume to her family for constructive criticism. They all told her the same thing: her resume did not reflect enough experience and education related to nursing. She did include her volunteer work at the neighborhood health clinic, but she mostly listed jobs as a cashier and her involvement with school sports.

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Focus on Relevant Information

A lot of students think a generalized resume describing everything they've ever done is a great way to get any kind of job or internship. Not true. The first rule of thumb for resume-writing is to only include information that is useful to the job you're applying for. For example, Samantha's experience as a cashier would have come in handy if she was applying for a job in retail or sales.

Be Ready to Write More Than One Resume

If you're applying for summer jobs or internships in a variety of fields, be prepared to write more than one resume. Once you have the first done, use it as a template and just cut and paste the most relevant information for different jobs.

The Four Key Elements

Four main themes you should always include in your resume, no matter where you're applying, are volunteerism, association memberships, computer proficiency, and knowledge of other languages.

1. Volunteerism

No matter where you're applying or what you plan to study in college, potential employers want to know you're a well-rounded member of society. Listing your participation in a program, such as Habitat for Humanity or your weekly work at a local soup kitchen, can definitely add some pizzazz to a resume short of work experience.

2. Association Memberships

It's also an added bonus for younger high school students to list any associations they've belonged to, such as:

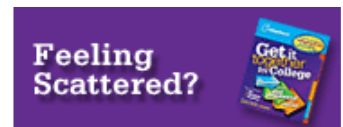National Honor Society (N.H.S.)

National Art Honor Society (N.A.H.S.)

Distributive Education Clubs of America (D.E.C.A.)—an association of marketing students

Juniors and seniors probably have more experience in this area, but never underestimate participation in group roles. This includes any other club participation at school or in your community.

3. Computer Proficiency

Let's face it, technology is everywhere. Knowledge of computers will most likely be a requirement for just about any job. List any and all experience you have with computers, naming the actual program names you're familiar with (Microsoft Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Photoshop).

4. Other Languages

The world is getting smaller and smaller, especially in the job market. Knowing a second or third language can put you at an advantage in qualifying for a job and will certainly separate you from other candidates.

Putting It All Together

While you definitely shouldn't go over a page, don't feel that you have to use the resume template that's found in most word processing programs. These models, though helpful, are often generic-looking. It's good to go the extra mile and show employers that you are as creative as you are intelligent. Differences in formatting (bullets, borderlines, or headings), fonts, styles, and sizes will catch the eye and draw attention to the most important information.

Organization

You can organize your resume in many different ways, but the following order is one of the most common. Use it to help you get started.

Objective: state what kind of job or internship you're looking for.

Experience: describe your job history.

Education: just list your high school, unless you've taken college courses on the side.

Other Skills/Information: list your computer or language skills and any associations or memberships to which you've belonged.

Action Words

Be sure to describe your roles and accomplishments with strong action words and key terms that will pop out at employers, usually ones that signify leadership and team roles you've had. These include words such as: team work, team player, multi-tasking, executed, organized, performed, maintained, supervised, managed, directed, developed, implemented.

Writing Style

The wording of your resume is just as important as the look. You may have to write several rough drafts to come up with one that will really shine. Here are a few writing style rules to keep in mind:

Use matching verb tenses.

Keep all descriptions short. Descriptions should generally take up no more than three to four lines on the page.

Full sentences are not necessary, but be consistent with punctuation.

Resume Resources

Several job search engines have resume-building pages on their websites that will give you step-by-step guidelines to writing a resume. Some popular sites to check out include:

Monster Jobs, www.monster.com

Yahoo! HotJobs, www.hotjobs.yahoo.com

JobSniper, www.jobsniper.com

CareerBuilder, www.careerbuilder.com

MSN Careers, www.careers.msn.com

JobWeb, www.jobweb.com

While these sites are free, they also offer resume-writing services you can order for a fee. It's always best to learn on your own, however, because knowing how to write a resume properly is a valuable skill you'll have for a lifetime.